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**NORMA KELSEY OF PSARA**

**INTERVIEWEE:** NORMA KELSEY, JACK KELSEY

**INTERVIEWERS:** ANGIE BARTELS, KAREN RICHTER

**SUBJECTS:** Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action (PSARA); World War II; labor movement; Salvation Army Church; Pentecostal Church; King County Labor Council; Labor Temple; Machinists Union; Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 8; Committee to Save Local 8; Washington State Labor Council; union organizing; Pacific Northwest Labor History Association (PNLHA); Evergreen College labor summer school; Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW); “Color Me Pink” workshop; Washington Federation of Teachers; Promise Keepers; United Farm Workers Association; Sandinistas; King County Labor Council Union Retirees Council; Alliance for Retired Americans; Washington State Alliance for Retired Americans; White House Conference on Aging; privatization of Social Security; Musicians’ Association of Seattle Local 76-493; Communists; Norma Kelsey; Jack Kelsey; Dale Daugherty; Maureen Bo; Karen Keiser; Susan Levy; Ross Rieder; Tom Lux; Ronald Reagan; Donald Trump; Jeff Johnson; Dolores Huerta; Cesar Chavez; Will Parry; Representative Adam Smith; Senator Patty Murray; President George W. Bush; Louise Parry; Lenus Westman; Doris Westman; Taimi Halonen; Oiva Halonen; Irene Hull; Lonnie Nelson; Reverend Harriett Walden

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[00:00:00] **ANGIE BARTELS:** Today is Friday, April 6, 2018. We are at the Labor Temple offices of PSARA, Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action. My name is Angie Bartels and I am one of the interviewers. Karen Richter is also here as one of the interviewers.

We are interviewing Norma Kelsey, who has been a lifetime activist and labor union activist as well, and we'd like to get her story. Along with Norma is Jack Kelsey, her son.

Welcome, Norma and Jack. Thank you for being here today.

[00:00:54] **NORMA KELSEY:** I'm glad to be here.

[00:00:56] **ANGIE:** Great. To start out, I just wanted to get a little bit of background information on you and your family. So, where were you born?

[00:01:07] **NORMA:** I was born in Independence, Kansas, which is a small town in the southeastern corner of Kansas by the Missouri and Oklahoma borders.

My father had been born in that town also. My grandparents had come there in a covered wagon, so I have many relatives still there. But thank gawd, I'm not in Kansas anymore. [laughter]

[00:01:40] **ANGIE:** Was it your parents who homesteaded in Kansas, assuming they homesteaded?

[00:01:49] **NORMA:** Yeah, my grandparents did. That was in the 1800s, of course. My father was born in 1912, the youngest of eight children, seven boys and one girl—poor girl.

[00:02:07] **ANGIE:** When were you born?

[00:02:08] **NORMA:** I was born in 1935, so I'm 82 years old now. My son, Jack, who's with me, is 65 years old.

[00:02:22] **ANGIE:** Where was your mother born?

[00:02:23] **NORMA:** My mother was born in a small town that no longer exists in Indiana. The name of the town was Petroleum. It was right outside of South Bend, Indiana. I was one of nine children, one of whom died in infancy, so I grew up with a lot of brothers and sisters, which was not unusual back then.

[00:02:49] **KAREN:** What number were you in the order of children?

[00:02:52] **NORMA:** I was next to the oldest. I have an older sister a year and a half older than I. I keep reminding her that she's the oldest, [laughter] what any good sister should do.

[00:03:06] **ANGIE:** What did your parents do?

[00:03:08] **NORMA:** My father was a painter and my mother was a housewife until World War II. My father was drafted into World War II into the Navy and he was on an aircraft carrier. The war was going so badly at that time. It was towards the end of the war, about two years before the war was over.

He had four children and was married when he was drafted. He was 34 years old. There were so many young men who were killed in that war that they were desperate for people then. When my father was drafted, his

older brother went along to try to join the Navy so he could take care of his little brother, but they wouldn't take him. [laughing] He had a bad heart, so my dad had to go it alone.

[00:04:05] **KAREN:** So, he was in the Pacific?

[00:04:07] **NORMA:** Yes, in the Pacific on an aircraft carrier.

[00:04:09] **KAREN:** Wow. So, you were a very young girl then when your father was drafted.

[00:04:17] **NORMA:** Yes, I was.

[00:04:20] **KAREN:** Where did you go to school?

[00:04:22] **NORMA:** Through grade school, I went to school in Independence. After my dad got out of the Navy, we moved to Wichita so that my father could find more work. We lived in Wichita where I went to the intermediate school, which then was a seventh, eighth and ninth grade. I then went to high school in Wichita. When I was in the 11th grade, I discovered boys, and I quit school. I got married. [laughing]

[00:04:54] **KAREN:** Oh, my gosh!

[00:04:56] **NORMA:** I was just 16 when I got married. Then I got this gift. Jack was born the following year. Jack has been a delight in my life. He has some developmentally disabled problems, but he is a great man and I love him dearly.

[00:05:20] **KAREN:** You were married at a very young age, so that was your husband. What is his name?

[00:05:29] **NORMA:** That was my first husband. My first husband, I was married to for seven and a half years. We had two more children. By the time I was 20, I had three children. Unfortunately, my husband was one of those men who believed that he owned his wife and children, so he was very brutal to us—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Finally, when I got away from him for the last time, we escaped with our lives.

[00:06:08] **KAREN:** You're very brave, Norma.

[00:06:10] **NORMA:** Then I went home to my parents with my children, and my mother took care of my children while I found work. A year after I was divorced, I met a wonderful man who is my current husband. His name is Robert Kelsey. A year after we got married, he adopted my three children, and then we had a son between us, and he had a son from his prior marriage who came to live with us.

Later in our marriage, we were foster parents to two more boys, who were twins. Their parents and grandparents had all died. Their parents had been friends of ours, so the boys came to live with us when they were 12 years old and we raised them through high school.

So, we had a big family. We were living in Fair Oaks, California, right outside of Sacramento when we were raising our family. It was a great place to have children then. My children all speak with such glowing terms of growing up in Fair Oaks, and of their father, too.

My husband started a Boy Scout troop for mentally retarded young men, including my son, and my husband was the scoutmaster for the troop. He took them to jamborees, he took them camping, and told them that there wasn't anything they couldn't do. He had them put up their own tents, had them build their bonfires, had them cook.

He was also the president of Jack's PTA for Jack's special school. Jack has always known that he's a special young man, and that the teachers that taught him are all angels. For someone to teach children who find it difficult to learn, and to teach them the same thing every day, over and over and over, I can't believe how they can do that, but they did. They taught Jack to print his name. That's all he could learn in reading and writing, but 10 years of going over the same thing, printing symbols that have no meaning, these teachers are wonderful.

[00:08:50] **KAREN:** What an amazing story.

[00:08:51] **NORMA:** It is, yeah.

[00:08:55] **KAREN:** He must have been a very special person.

[00:08:58] **NORMA:** Oh, they were.

[00:09:03] **ANGIE:** I'm just curious how you got out to California from Kansas.

[00:09:08] **NORMA:** My parents had moved to California, and that is where I got my divorce from my first husband and where I met my second husband. My parents had moved there, so my first husband and I moved there, too, and my grandparents had moved out there to California. Everybody moved there to find better jobs.

[00:09:29] **KAREN:** Was that after the war?

[00:09:31] **NORMA:** Yes, that was after the war. After the war, we had moved to Wichita, and then moved to California. Like so many working-class people, you have to move where there's jobs.

It was difficult for us to leave Kansas because that's really where our roots were and where all of our relatives were. But that is what makes this country. Just because you're born someplace doesn't mean that you have to stay there.

And just because you're born with one belief, that doesn't mean that you have to continue to believe that. You keep reading, you keep informing yourself, you keep meeting other people and keep open to new ideas and new people and new experiences. I'm really happy that I had the opportunity to expand my horizons from that small town in Kansas.

[00:10:34] **KAREN:** Do you feel that those kinds of opportunities to change and develop your beliefs is something unique to the United States, or do you think that's more universal, or Western?

[00:10:53] **NORMA:** I think that it's unique to people who are searching for something. Some people really can't seem to—they're afraid to go beyond the perimeters that they are familiar with. But in this country, I think that we have an unusual country in that everyone who came here was seeking something, so I think there are more people in this country that are willing to reach out and to go different places and experience more things.

However, that doesn't mean that everyone does that. Even though people came to this country, a lot of people then say, "I will never move again," and they stay in one place and they become very bound to all of the ideas that are around them. Especially when you live in a small town, you don't want to go against what is the common belief.

Independence is a very conservative place now. When we went back for a family reunion maybe 20 years ago, my aunts and uncles and cousins and all—they're all teachers and farmers and all that, and many of them have

traveled but always come back to Independence—are very afraid of change, so they’re not open to having their ideas that they believed 100 years ago challenged.

I was astounded to find that even 20 years ago, their ideas should have changed. And they’re good. They go to church, they’re good Christians, but they thought that the poor were poor because they didn’t work hard enough, and because they were that kind of people.

They thought that women should stay at home and not go out and work and challenge men. As the Bible said, which is what they say, a man is the head of the house and a woman is supposed to do as she’s told by her husband.

They believe that the races should not mix. They believe in the things that should have been dropped years ago.

[00:13:43] **KAREN:** Do you think if you had stayed there you would still be the person you are today?

[00:13:47] **NORMA:** No, I don’t think I would have been. I think that I would probably, like everyone else, be afraid to be the nail that stuck its head up that is pounded down. I would probably have gone on going to the churches that taught the things, like the televangelists teach.

I’m so happy that somehow, my life ended up that I left that environment and was able to expand my horizons and my thinking, and to meet people who taught me, teachers along the way. People just like me who somebody had taught them.

I found that especially in the labor movement, and then through the labor movement in social issue movements where people have learned a different way of being, and they’re willing to teach others. And they’re open and they’re friendly.

People in our movement are warm and loving, and they’re funny. [laughter] They go out of their way. They’ll carry your coat the extra mile. I’m just fortunate to be in a movement with the kind of people that are in this movement.

[00:15:35] **KAREN:** I’m thinking a little bit chronologically here. We don’t necessarily have to do that, but I also want to bring that in. When you think back about your early life, you’re saying that there were people who inspired you, and who taught you, and helped you to expand your ideas and your beliefs. Can you think back and identify who some of these people were? I’d also like to see if we could tie that into how you got drawn into the labor movement.

[00:16:14] **NORMA:** One of the most important influences on my early life was being a member of the Salvation Army Church. My grandmother had been a Salvationist for many years, and there was a Salvation Army Church there in Independence. My father was going to be a Salvation Army officer and he went to their training school before he went into the Navy, but he couldn’t stand the severe weather there. He got an abscessed lung and had to go home.

Then he met my mother. After they got married and had four children, he went into the service. He did not pursue going back to being a Salvation Army officer.

Through my teenage years, my sister and I, even in Wichita, Kansas, went to the Salvation Army Church. The Salvation Army teaches that you should give; that it is our role in life to help others, and that we are fortunate

when we have enough that we can give. So, I learned early on that life isn't about what you can get, but about what you can give. I think it was the Salvation Army that taught me that.

[00:17:46] **KAREN:** Wonderful. So many of us have started from a spiritual, religious background, just those basic Christian values have often been the things that have launched us into the world.

[00:18:02] **NORMA:** Yes, and no matter what religion, as long as it is the one that teaches kindness and giving, and that we're all as one, and that we have a responsibility to others; that it doesn't matter what church, whether you're a Buddhist or whether you even have what we call a religion, because when you believe in those precepts, you are religious. That's what religion is.

[00:18:32] **ANGIE:** Yeah.

[00:18:32] **KAREN:** That's a better way to define religion.

[00:18:37] **ANGIE:** When you went to California, did you continue with the church?

[00:18:41] **NORMA:** No, I didn't. When my husband and I got married, we started going to a church that was a Pentecostal Church, which is like the televangelists' churches. He felt very at ease there because the Pentecostal Church teaches that the man is the head of the house. They teach the women and the girls to be subservient, and to be meek, and to do as they're told. That just about killed me and my children by trying to live up to that kind of a teaching.

I don't really have an organized belief now. I don't go to churches, but I guess the labor movement then became my spiritual home. I remember that Dale Daugherty, who used to be the head of the King County Labor Council—he was the president for many years when I got really involved in labor here in Seattle—said that organized labor is a way of life. It's not just having a contract and what you do for work, but it's a way that you live your life where you help others, where you believe that it's your responsibility to take care of your brother and sister.

Organized labor, then, deserves to have—as their building is called, it's the Labor Temple. Dale Daugherty said that indeed, it is the temple of labor, the temple of the working-class people. This is where we belong. This is where we are a family. We call each other “brother” and “sister.” When we go to our meetings in the Labor Temple, we'll get up and we'll say, “Sister So-and-So said this,” or “Brother So-and-So.”

I really liked that. So, Dale was another one of my teachers.

[00:20:56] **ANGIE:** Yeah. Did you work outside of the home in California?

[00:21:02] **NORMA:** Not until I got divorced. Then I had to. I had taken secretarial courses in high school before I dropped out, so that gave me a foot in the door. I started out as a receptionist for a building company, and then a real estate company.

When I was pregnant with my last child, David, when I was looking for a job, and at the unemployment office in Sacramento, they sent me out to a labor union. [laughing] That was the Machinists Union there in Sacramento. It opened my eyes as to what labor unions were all about.

My youngest son now is 55 years old, so it's been 56 years since I started as a labor unionist. I worked there until David was born, and then I went back to work when he was three weeks old and I've worked in unions ever since.

[00:22:21] **KAREN:** Fifty-six years. Wow. That's wonderful.

[00:22:24] **ANGIE:** That was the early 1960s then?

[00:22:24] **NORMA:** Yeah.

[00:22:30] **ANGIE:** When did the family move to Seattle? Tell us that story.

[00:22:33] **NORMA:** My husband had lost his job. Companies had merged there in Seattle. He was a concrete engineer who designed and tested concrete, mostly for bridges and skyscrapers and tunnels and highways and stuff like that.

When the companies merged, he was looking for another job. Three companies here in Seattle were looking here in Seattle for someone with his experience and his knowledge, so they recruited him. They flew us up to Seattle and interviewed my husband.

Then he went to work for one of them up here. The company was very good to us. They paid our moving expenses. The company put us up in a motel until we could find a house.

Then that company went bankrupt after a few years. One of these guys that buys businesses and then strips them of their assets bought this company, whose headquarters was up in Bellingham. There were over 150 employees who lost their jobs. Some of the people became alcoholics, they became drug addicts, they couldn't find other work. They committed suicide.

When companies buy and strip assets, they strip people of their ability to provide for their families. They strip people of their independence. They strip people of everything that made them a person and leave them shells. They don't just leave empty companies. They leave empty people.

That has made me even more of a progressive and more dedicated to labor because we need some force that is strong enough and organized enough to balance this kind of action. I felt very honored to be a part of organized labor and to be able to fight the good fight for workers, and not for just what we can get out of for ourselves.

[00:25:22] **KAREN:** What were you doing at this time?

[00:25:25] **NORMA:** I transferred my membership from the Office Employees Union in Sacramento to the Office Employees here at Local 8. Local 8 was in trusteeship when I transferred my membership up here. My great friend, longtime friend and coworker, Maureen Bo and I and some others decided that we did not want the trustee to merge us with his own local, which was nothing he should have been doing anyhow.

You're supposed to be able to trust a trustee to bring your local back out of trusteeship. While he had us under his thumb, he was trying to take over our local. So, we formed a group that we called the Committee to Save Local 8, and we started our own shadow union.

We paid dues to ourselves. We elected our own president. We started a bank account. We hired a lawyer to fight with us. We started asking different friendly unionists to help us—that was back when we had to mimeograph everything—mimeograph things. [laughter]

People would help us in many ways. Our good friend, Karen Keiser, is also a member of Local 8, and she was a member of our Committee to Save Local 8. A lot of the people who are now in the Washington State Labor Council and the King County Labor Council were helping.

After we forced the international to let us vote on whether we wanted to merge or not, we voted four to one not to merge. After that, we got to have a new election. When we elected officers, we elected Maureen Bo as the business manager. First, I was elected as the secretary-treasurer. Then I was vice president, and then I was president.

Then we changed Local 8. We went from being a Tea Party union to a union of activist women. Susan Levy was a member of our Committee to Save Local 8, and all of these wonderful women, most of whom are retired by now, as am I.

We supported each other. We helped each other get into office. We met and identified women to run for the first woman to be on the Executive Board of the Washington State Labor Council. We identified other women leaders.

[00:29:06] **ANGIE:** Who would that be?

[00:29:15] **NORMA:** Ross Rieder was the president. Tom Lux is now the president of the Labor History Association and Evelyn was Ross Rieder's first wife. I can't remember her last name now—she used her maiden name—and she was the first one to be elected to the Board of the Washington State Labor Council.

Then we started a summer school for labor union women at Evergreen College. Women from the unions all over the state would get their unions to pay their scholarship. We would go and stay there for a week and we would learn union history, union organizing.

We made connections with each other, and we stayed right there in dormitories so that we could get to know each other well and to make connections all over the state. That was really a great boost to women starting to run for office.

Then CLUW—the Coalition for Labor Union Women—had a workshop of several weekends, and they called it “Color Me Pink.” They taught us more on how to organize and support each other and to get into office in our own unions. First, to become shop stewards, and how to get on committees, and how to organize to get people to support us. Women are still doing the same, supporting each other to climb even higher every day.

[00:31:13] **ANGIE:** That's really inspirational.

[00:31:18] **KAREN:** And you say all these people that we know were involved with you that are still involved today.

[00:31:24] **NORMA:** Yes, they are. Susan became the president of her statewide union of teachers. Her union is the progressive Teachers Union and not the conservative Teachers Union. The Washington Federation of Teachers was hers. Just wonderful to be with all those women who made differences in their own unions, and identified women in their unions to bring up into leadership.

[00:31:57] **KAREN:** That's wonderful. Can you identify a few people or maybe a few movements that inspired you during this time, people that you looked to, and that you gained strength and ideas from?



[00:32:20] **NORMA:** One was Maureen Bo. Before she became the business manager of Local 8, she worked for the Washington State Labor Council as a secretary. Prior to that, she was a schoolteacher. She taught Spanish. Then she spent two years in Peru and she taught English as a second language.

Maureen was never afraid to take on a new challenge. Maureen was so inspirational in putting together this group of women to fight for our rights to have our own union. She is the first one, and the one who still inspires me all the time. [laughter]

[00:33:15] **KAREN:** She's an amazing woman.

[00:33:16] **ANGIE:** She is.

[00:33:19] **NORMA:** Then the first president of the King County Labor Council, Dale Daugherty. Wonderful man. He's retired. One time the Seattle Times was censored one week. They could not run in the comic strips a list of names. This was under the Ronald Reagan administration. They couldn't run a list of the names of people who were indicted in his administration.

The Seattle Times said that that was political and it couldn't be run in the comic strips. At the union, there was fighting against the censorship, so I got dressed up in red, white and blue, and I got a flag, and I put it upside down on a staff, and I came down and asked Dale Daugherty if he wanted to go picket the Seattle Times with me.

Dale couldn't go that day, but I went over there and picketed. All of the reporters inside, when they saw me out there, they were giving me the thumbs up. [laughter] Cars were going past and honking. I'd drawn a picket sign where it said, "No Free Speech, Seattle Times!" [laughter]

[00:34:48] **KAREN:** We need you to do it again, I think.

[00:34:51] **NORMA:** Yeah! [laughter]

[00:34:56] **ANGIE:** Can you tell us any stories of things that you did that were fun?

[00:35:05] **KAREN:** And being an activist.

[00:35:10] **NORMA:** If you can't have fun doing this . . . [laughing] As president of my union, I wanted to make my union meetings really interesting. One time, I brought in puppets. One was George Bush and the other was Bob Dole. At that time, they were both running for the presidency for the Republican Party. I put on a puppet show for my members and had them fighting each other, using voices for each one.

Another time, I brought in a talking stick for the members. I called up members to do each section of the meeting. For instance, one would come up and lead the Pledge of Allegiance. One would come up and induct the new members into the union. The next would come up and run the old business.

Because I wanted to let them know—this is what I told them—that "It's not hard being an officer. It's really exciting, and any of you can do it, so you should run for office."

One time, it was a really nice evening—because we had evening meetings at 6:00—so I adjourned the meeting and we went over to the park across the street down by the International Fountain and we continued our meeting down there.

There's just different ways to make it [fun] . People would be afraid to miss the meeting because they might miss out on some fun.

I had everybody at every workplace to do something different at each union meeting. One workplace, they would either sing a song, or they would act out a play or they would do something to entertain us. There's just different ways to—we shouldn't always be formal. We should have fun. [laughter]

[00:37:28] **KAREN:** We agree!

[00:37:35] **ANGIE:** Norma, what would you consider your greatest accomplishment? If you don't want to list one, you can list the top three.

[00:37:51] **NORMA:** I think the greatest is that Jack has turned out to be such a wonderful man. When he was diagnosed when he was three years old, I thought his life was over and he would never get to do anything that everybody else had done. Jack has traveled. Jack has more friends than anyone I know. Jack is kind and loving and generous. I think that that is my biggest accomplishment.

It wasn't my alone because it was my husband, Bob. It was his teachers. All of his friends. All of his brothers and sisters. Jack was the oldest of all of them and they treated Jack just like any other brother and sister. They wouldn't let him get by with anything. [laughter] He had to do his own things. But let anyone attack him in any way, they would be there for Jack.

[Jack Kelsey makes some comments not transcribed 00:39:13 through 00:39:40]

[00:39:39] **KAREN:** We were wondering, what surprises you these days? Because you've been through so much. You have seen so many administrations, so much corruption.

[00:39:50] **NORMA:** What surprises me is that I can't believe that people still support Donald Trump. I can't understand how that can be.

[00:40:04] **KAREN:** It surprises me, too, Norma.

[00:40:10] **NORMA:** And if you can't understand, how can you help them understand? If you don't know how it happens that they are so blind. What is that saying? "There are none so blind as those that will not see." For somebody who will not see, how do you make them want to see? Because something inside of them, they might know, but they refuse to allow that knowledge to come forward.

[00:40:43] **ANGIE:** Yes, and it almost feels like we're slipping in some ways, and that's scary. It's really scary.

[00:40:50] **NORMA:** Yeah, it is. Especially a few years ago, when there was that movement, the Promise Keepers. Do you remember that?

[00:41:03] **ANGIE:** Yes.

[00:41:03] **NORMA:** That was so scary because it was making such great progress, and I could see us going way back to the woman is my possession, my kids are my possession, I can do with them as I will. Even women were supporting that movement.

We think that we've made such good progress in many ways, but it seems like sometimes it's a very thin veneer of progress, and we can lose it any time if we don't keep working. Civilization even. We could lose this world.

And people will not see. It's astounding that in this day and age, knowledge is everywhere. All you have to do is look for it . . .

It's not like when I was young where people got their thinking through the church, through the school, through their neighbors, through their newspapers—if they could read, because a lot of people still couldn't read back then.

But now, knowledge is everywhere. But you can't make people understand. You can't make them open their minds. I guess if we knew that, if we had the key to that . . .

[00:43:02] **KAREN:** Yes, it's always been fragile, and now, with social media, it seems like people can post whatever they want to post, and then put it out as fact. Then people choose to believe it and the factual news or events get labeled "fake news."

[00:43:25] **NORMA:** Yes.

[00:43:25] **KAREN:** And fake news gets labeled as the real thing.

[00:43:31] **NORMA:** And where we have a president—a president of the United States—who gets up and lies with every sentence he says. People know that, and yet, he's still president.

[00:43:46] **KAREN:** Hopefully, not too much longer. [laughter]

[00:43:49] **NORMA:** Like Tom Styer says on that advertisement that he has, what he can't understand is why he's still president. That's true.

[00:43:59] **JACK KELSEY:** They're talking about impeaching him.

[00:44:00] **ANGIE:** Yes, we should hope. We have to take back the Senate. That's our job this year.

[00:44:06] **NORMA:** Yes, it is, and it looks like it's going to happen, that the Senate and the House will become blue. But then, that's when our work begins all over again, because we still are going to have the backlash who will blaming everything on the new people, so our work won't stop.

[00:44:32] **ANGIE:** It's so true.

[00:44:34] **KAREN:** Can I ask a question? Norma, ever since I've met you, I've been so impressed at how positive you are. Even with all the stuff that we just got done talking about, look at you. You're still smiling and still feeling happy. How do you stay so positive?

[00:44:49] **NORMA:** I've been through some really bad depressions in my lifetime. But you can really choose to be happy and let the rest go.

A year ago, I almost died. When I came out of that alive—that was in January of last year, and I was in critical condition for five days, and then in a nursing home for three weeks. The first night I was in Emergency, that's when I do believe I died. Then this wonderful woman doctor wouldn't let me go and she held me in her arms, held me against her breast. She sang spirituals to me and she wouldn't let me go. All night long, she stayed there with me, and sang to me, and hummed to me, and held me, and loved me, and she loved me back to life.

[00:46:00] **ANGIE:** What happened? What brought you into the Emergency Room?

[00:46:06] **NORMA:** I had been having a lot of trouble with my breathing, and not eating right, not taking my medicine right. One of my sons had died the year before, and my husband was getting worse all the time, and it was like I was in this valley. My life didn't mean a whole lot. I just wasn't taking care of myself.

By not eating right and not taking my medicine right, I got very confused. I kept fainting. My potassium would get out of whack. They'd have to take me to Emergency, and in and out of Emergency. That one night, it was about too late.

But when I came out of that and that woman doctor—I wrote her a letter afterwards and took it to the Emergency Room and asked them to give the letter to her, to tell her that she saved my life that night, and I'll never forget how she held me and sang to me.

When I was in the nursing home for three weeks, there was a doctor there in my wing where we were not in very good condition, not in very good shape mentally and physically. This doctor—this was right after Trump got elected—started giving a bad time to the workers there. He said he was teasing them, but he kept saying, “You better not get out that door. There might be somebody waiting for you.” These were people who were scared anyhow because they were the cleaners, the bed makers, the pans, the janitors.

[00:48:22] **KAREN:** Were they immigrants? New immigrants?

[00:48:26] **NORMA:** Yeah, and workers there. I kept hearing this doctor telling them that. These people, we were having blizzards and everything, so they were working 12-hour shifts. They were having to stay there and sleep and then go back on.

I had enough of it and I went out there and I confronted the doctor. I told him that he should be ashamed of himself. I said, “I've been hearing how you have been talking to the workers here. Do you remember the oath you took when you became a doctor? I'm going to write a letter to management.” And I did.

I wrote a letter to management, and I had the nurse make a copy of the letter I wrote, and for her to take it to the management, and for her to sign that she took it. I kept the original, telling about what that doctor was doing. I said, “And it's not only the doctor. I hear some of the upper like nurse superintendents and people who are making fun of these people. That is not all right and I will be calling”—in fact, I told them to call their union. They were scared to say anything.

I carry a copy of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in my purse all the time, and I asked one of the people who was supporting me to make copies of it and I left that all around there so that the workers would know their rights.

I put a note on my door that management could not come into my room without permission. Somebody from management came in the next morning—they sent a woman—and she said, “Do you mind if I come in, Norma? I'm with corporate management. My name is So-and-So.” I said, “You may come in.” She said, “Could we talk for a while?” I said, “Yes, we can. Did you bring a witness?” She said, “I don't think we need a witness.” I said, “Yes, I think we do, so we can talk if we have a witness.” [laughter]

Then she said, “Do you mind if I just look around your room a little bit?” I said, “Go ahead. Do you have a copy of a search warrant?” [laughter]

[00:51:11] **KAREN:** I think you intimidated her.

[00:51:12] **NORMA:** Then she flounces out of there. Then Local 6 sent a representative out. Then they had a work stoppage out there. [laughter and clapping]

[00:51:34] **KAREN:** Bravo!

[00:51:35] **NORMA:** I thought, well, if I'm not going to die, I might as well live and do something as much as I can while I'm still alive. [laughter]

[00:51:42] **ANGIE:** That's so awesome. That's a beautiful story.

[00:51:49] **NORMA:** Besides that, what can they do to me? I'm 82 years old, I'm a sick woman, so what are they going to do? Take me to jail in handcuffs? I still have my right to talk, so they couldn't do anything.

Then I started singing to everyone. I would sing silly songs from childhood and all that, and have people sing with me. They told me that I had to stay in my room; that I was upsetting the patients. [laughter]

I said, "Okay, I'll stay in my room." Then the patients brought chairs out into the hall, and they sat on the chairs, and I went to my door. I stood inside the door and started singing, and they started singing with me. [laughter] Every once in a while, you get down so far that there's no place to go but up.

Seeing that, hey, I still have some spark left in me, that's why I smile, because I'm alive. It took several months there, but every day, I thought how lucky I am to be alive. You forget that after a while.

[00:53:09] **ANGIE:** Yes, you do. And standing up for those low-wage, new immigrant workers, that's . . .

[00:53:21] **KAREN:** . . . just incredible. Because of everything you've told us about yourself, you've inspired them, I'm sure.

[00:53:29] **NORMA:** I saw one of them in the parking lot of Safeway a few months after that. She came up to me and she said, "Are you Norma?" I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I worked over at Burien Nursing Home," and she said her name. I said, "I remember your face but I didn't think you would remember me." She said, "Oh, we'll never forget you." [laughter]

Probably, if I need to go back to a nursing home, they probably won't allow me to go to Burien.

[00:54:04] **ANGIE:** I love that. I'm just wondering, what advice would you give to people like us, people who are following in your footsteps, and even younger—because we're not youngsters—but young people who are coming up?

[00:54:30] **NORMA:** Do as much as you can, but don't take yourself too seriously. Take the work that you do seriously, but not yourself. And have fun, and do every new experience that you can have. Do it. You'll not regret it. If you can take a trip out of the country, take the trip, because the only way you can see your country is to go outside the country, and you see it with new eyes when you come back.

Don't be afraid of anything that comes up. If somebody wants you to fill an office, fill it. You'll do fine. If somebody wants you to run for office, run for office. You'll never regret having a new experience, and you'll learn something about it. And have fun.

[00:55:22] **KAREN:** I used to have a T-shirt, and it was a saying by Emma Goldman. "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution." [laughter] I always thought that was great.

To hear you, it reminds me of that attitude and that approach to life, to work, to organizing.

[00:55:56] **NORMA:** And you see, in PSARA, I really liked that because we have fun. At the mailing, [remember] how much fun we had?

[00:56:02] **KAREN:** It was fun, yes.

[00:56:09] **NORMA:** Like Jeff Johnson, who's the head of the Washington State Labor Council, one time, he and Jack and I were over in Yakima together. We had spent the weekend over there because Dolores Huerta, who was the cofounder of the National Farmworkers Union, was over there. It was for the weekend that they were having the farm workers march over there.

Now I tell people, "The time that Jeff Johnson and I spent the weekend together over at Yakima . . ." [laughter]

People kinda look. [laughing] Then I explain, but that's what I mean by having fun.

[00:56:54] **ANGIE:** Is there anything else that you feel you would like to achieve in your life? You've achieved a lot.

[00:57:05] **NORMA:** Yes, to stay alive for a while. [laughter] I used to want to go back to Nicaragua one more time, but I don't really want to go anymore when I found out more about what's happening there, since the Sandinistas have turned out to be the kind of people that they overthrew.

[00:57:31] **KAREN:** When were you there, Norma? I know you told me that story but I don't remember exactly.

[00:57:36] **NORMA:** The first time I was there was when I was 50 years old. That was in 85. Then I was down there a couple of times, once for a sister city convention/conference and once just to visit. The second time was when Jack went with me, too. We just visited all over the country.

That was still when the Sandinistas were the Sandinistas. Since then, they've lost their way. You have to be very careful when you do win that you don't just think that it can last on its own. You have to be very vigilant to make sure that you don't lose your way and be swept up in the trappings of power, and think that you're somebody, because you're not. None of us are better than anybody else.

We could all fill any position that we wanted to fill if we were born in the right place, if we had the right support, if we had the right people around us. If Trump can be president, well, I could be Queen Mary. [laughter]

[00:58:58] **KAREN:** Why not?

[00:58:59] **NORMA:** If I wanted to be.

[00:59:00] **KAREN:** You'd do a good job. [laughter] There's a quote from Cesar Chavez here. What does it say?

[00:59:12] **ANGIE:** It says, "True wealth is not measured in money or status or power. It is measured in the legacy we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire."

[00:59:25] **NORMA:** Cesar Chavez never stayed in a motel. Whenever he traveled, he always stayed with his farm workers. He didn't see himself as being above anyone.

[00:59:40] **ANGIE:** He did not. Cesar never had money. He didn't have a fancy car. He and his wife, Helen, lived in La Paz, which is the headquarters of the United Farmworkers Union, communally, with all their children, and raised their children, and lived just like everyone else who worked for the union. If you've ever worked for the union, the United Farmworkers Union, you lived on \$5.00 a week [laughing] and room and board.

[01:00:14] **NORMA:** Dolores Huerta was the same way. She had five kids when they were organizing. They organized at her kitchen table. She still had to cook dinner.

[01:00:23] **ANGIE:** She did everything.

[01:00:29] **NORMA:** Yeah. Marvelous woman. People were drawn to Cesar because of him not thinking that he was above anyone else.

[01:00:49] **ANGIE:** I think that's true. I think, too, that in those days, like during the grape boycott, when a farmer worker started a boycott, even people who were Republicans, like my father, belonged to labor unions, so working people knew that the way to get a better life was by getting wage and benefits so that you could better provide for yourself and your family, you joined a union, and you supported the union.

[01:01:29] **NORMA:** Yes, you did, and the only way to have respect is to have a contract. Young people say that they don't need a union, and I say, "Everyone wants a contract. Do you think that any of the CEOs or the board chairmen would become board chairmen without a contract? They talk about their contracts all the time, and their golden parachutes. Why should you not have a contract if they have contracts? Do you buy a house without a contract? Do you buy a car without a contract? A contract is just saying I'll do this, you do that, and this is our goal. That's all a contract is."

[01:02:15] **ANGIE:** Right, because your work has value.

[01:02:17] **NORMA:** That's right, so you don't have to go on your knees to your boss and say, "Please, could I have another crumb today?" Because you are respected. Your boss knows that you're worth something, and you know that your boss is worth something.

[Phone rings]

[01:02:43] **ANGIE:** It'll stop eventually.

[01:02:44] **NORMA:** Doesn't matter.

[01:02:47] **ANGIE:** What else do you want to say to us, Norma?

[01:02:54] **KAREN:** Or to PSARA, actually?

[01:02:56] **ANGIE:** That's right. When you're talking to us, you're talking to PSARA.

[01:03:02] **NORMA:** I'd just like to talk about the wonderful people that I've had a chance to meet in my life. We were at La Paz—Jack went with us, too—and we went to the funeral of Cesar. We were in Sacramento at

that time visiting my parents when we heard of his death, so Bob and Jack and I drove down to La Paz to be a part of the cortege that followed him.

[01:03:35] **KAREN:** How did you become involved with PSARA?

[01:03:41] **NORMA:** I got to know Will through different events.

[01:03:46] **KAREN:** That would be Will Parry?

[01:03:47] **NORMA:** Yeah, Will Parry. We all carried on trying to put together this coalition. There was also a different retirees group. It was called the King County Labor Council Union Retirees Council. Only labor unions could belong to that council. When I retired, I became president of that council.

Will and I were working together and I said, “It doesn’t really make sense, because our council really wasn’t doing anything. We were endorsing things, we were doing things in name only.” People weren’t turning out to meetings. They weren’t interested in coming to board meetings. They would pay their dues, but not really . . . and Will was really doing something, so I asked Will about us merging. I would call a meeting and let people come and vote on whether they wanted to merge with the alliance, and we voted to merge.

[01:05:01] **KAREN:** Oh, interesting.

[01:05:03] **ANGIE:** What was the alliance called?

[01:05:06] **NORMA:** The Alliance for Retired Americans. That was what Will Parry was at that time. It wouldn’t become Puget Sound until Will realized that the alliance really wasn’t doing much, and Puget Sound was doing everything.

We were really growing, we were getting active, and the alliance was trying to hold us back, but they wanted the Washington State Alliance [for Retired Americans] to tell the Puget Sound Alliance what we should be doing, and the Washington State Alliance wasn’t doing anything. They had become just static, just signed their name.

That alliance is still in business, and they are a part of the AFL-CIO, but they still really don’t do anything. That was like the Puget Sound Council of the King County Labor Council. We had a charter from AFL-CIO, but charters don’t mean anything if you don’t do something—if you’re not out there on the streets, if you’re not planning, if you’re not growing, if you’re not organizing—and I didn’t know how to go about doing that, and Will was doing a great job.

I got on the board of Will Parry’s alliance. Then we went back to Washington, D.C. to the White House Conference on Aging. The White House had this about every 10 years. They paid for our trip back there, from all over the country. Your two senators and your representatives get to appoint one person each to represent them back at the White House Council on Aging. I was appointed by [Representative] Adam Smith to be his representative back there, and Will was appointed, I think, by [Senator] Patty Murray.

We made sure that the people in our group were all appointed, and we went back there and we raised hell back there. [laughter]

The second [George W.] Bush was supposed to have been one of the keynote speakers there, and because we were—what was happening was that he had named all these people on the board of the White House Council on



Aging, and they were all trying to privatize Social Security at this, and get us to get the representatives there to support it, because then he could say, “I’ve got widespread support of all the retirees all over the country.”

We saw what he was doing, so we started organizing there. We had these resolutions drawn up, and we passed the word. We had meetings. We told everybody what was happening. We tried to introduce all of these resolutions on the floor, and they wouldn’t let any of the delegates even have the microphone. They didn’t have a microphone on the floor. They were just going to tell us what to do.

We got up and spoke anyhow, and we took the resolutions and dumped them right there in front of the chair, who was trying to call us to order. The next day, Bush was supposed to be there. Well, guess what? He backed out. [laughter] He said that he had a prior commitment to go to an old folks’ home that was about 50 miles from there, so he couldn’t come to ours, so he went to this old folks’ home. [laughing]

Anyhow, we stopped it, so the resolution passed.

[01:09:24] **ANGIE:** Your leadership helps us to continue Social Security as it is and keep it strong.

[01:09:34] **NORMA:** Will was great in organizing, and he knows everybody. I really miss him. And Louise, too. Louise took a quieter—I mean, she was always supporting, always there, but she didn’t really run for anything. She allowed Will to be the face, but she was a part of this couple that knew who they were and what they were doing.

You know that Louise was—was she the first violinist?—in the Seattle Symphony.

[01:10:18] **ANGIE:** No, I didn’t know that.

[01:10:21] **NORMA:** She had been for many years, like 30 years or something, but she didn’t let people know.

[01:10:30] **KAREN:** She must have been in the musicians’ union [Musicians’ Association of Seattle Local 76-493] .

[01:10:32] **NORMA:** Oh, yeah, she was. Will was always, always reading and studying from the time he was a young man.

[01:10:56] **ANGIE:** Was Will Parry one of those persons who inspired people?

[01:11:00] **NORMA:** Oh, yes. So did the other Communists in the Labor Council because the Communists were the first strong labor union in this country, but they were Communists because they believed that workers should own the means of producing, and workers had the right to be owners since they made and helped sell them.

I wasn’t a Communist, but I’ve studied Communism and socialism and the differences because I wanted to know. They had a convention here maybe seven or eight years ago here in Seattle and I went there. There are still a lot of people who I admire who are still members—I can’t say they’re still members. They were at that time still members, but they might not be anymore. These were principled people.

[01:12:15] **ANGIE:** Did you know Doris and Lenus Westman?

[01:12:17] **NORMA:** I don’t think so.

[01:12:23] **ANGIE:** What about Taimi and Oiva Halonen?

[01:12:27] **NORMA:** No, I just knew the people who were in labor. And Irene Hull, of course, and Lonnie Nelson. Lonnie was one of the first founders, along with Harriett Walden, of the Mothers Against Police Brutality. Lonnie Nelson was a very strong labor union person.

[01:12:56] **KAREN:** Yeah, we have to follow up with Reverend Harriett Walden.

[01:12:59] **NORMA:** Yeah, and I haven't heard back from her, so I'll have to follow up.

[01:13:03] **ANGIE:** Apparently, she was a PSARA member for some time, but she's not anymore. We'd love to have her back.

Well, this is quite wonderful, and fun. [laughter] A wonderful opportunity.

[01:13:26] **NORMA:** Jack worked long enough to earn his own Social Security. He worked for McDonald's for 12 years, cleaning their lobby. Then he worked for 12 years for Safeway, cleaning their meat department and their bakery. His eyes got so bad, he couldn't work anymore, but he worked enough to draw his own Social Security. So, he was a member of a union.

[01:13:54] **JACK:** I'm still a member of the union, the butchers' union.

[01:14:03] **KAREN:** I wanted to say one thing. Norma, we went down to Olympia, you and I, and you did some testimony in support of the Long-Term Care Act. I've been down to Olympia for eons. It was part of my former job. I testified, and I knew lots of people who testified.

But I'll tell you what. When you were up there and you were talking—and my experience has been all the people on the committees, the congresspeople, their aides, they're always chatting, they're looking at their phones—when you spoke, that all stopped, and I had never experienced that before.

[01:14:40] **NORMA:** Oh, really?

[01:14:40] **KAREN:** Everybody paid attention to everything you were saying. There wasn't a peep out of anybody.

[01:14:48] **NORMA:** Thank you for telling me that.

[01:14:48] **KAREN:** It was quite inspiring that they really listened to you.

[01:14:52] **ANGIE:** What did you say, Norma, for those of us who were not present?

[01:14:56] **NORMA:** I told them my experience, how I had lost so much because of not having the long-term care experience. How we needed that insurance. Just from that perspective, I couldn't understand why this country couldn't provide that when countries all over the world provide it.

I think it was because of my talking so openly about my personal experiences. That's why everyone listened. It wasn't just talking about an issue, it was talking about real people, real things that happened and that are happening, not only to me but to others just like me.

[01:16:00] **KAREN:** Thank you so much for doing that.

[01:16:02] **NORMA:** Thank you for taking me. One time when Karen came out to my house to help me when I was moving, I was having a really bad day that day, and I started crying, and she put her arms around me and she held me and said, “That’s all right. It’s all right.” I’ll never forget that because I needed someone to hold me and let me cry.

[01:16:27] **ANGIE:** We all need that now and again. It’s really important.

[01:16:31] **NORMA:** It is.

[01:16:33] **ANGIE:** Karen has held a lot of us. [laughter]

[01:16:36] **KAREN:** We do it for each other.

[01:16:38] **ANGIE:** Yeah, we do. We hold each other.

[01:16:46] **KAREN:** Thank you so much. It’s been quite wonderful. If you think of other people that are PSARA members that you’d like to know more about, let us know and we’ll see if they want to be interviewed.

[01:16:56] **NORMA:** I’d like to know more about everybody. I’d like to know more about you, because it’s interesting to know what brought you here. Why did we all end up here when we could have been anywhere?

[01:17:10] **KAREN:** We will do that with many of our members, and we will share each other’s stories. Thank you, Norma, for being the very first person to share your story. Congratulations. Thank you.

[01:17:26] **NORMA:** Thank you for having me.

[01:17:32] **KAREN:** Thus, we will conclude our conversation.